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ABSTRACT

There are several reasons why Japan has one of the world's highest literacy rates. One reason is the nature of the Japanese written language, which employs a dual code of ideographs representing specific objects and a syllabary, in which each symbol represents a separate syllable. The syllable symbols are read consistently the same way, and beginning reading students are taught the syllabary before they learn the ideographs. Learning syllables as a unit of pronunciation appears to be easier than learning a phonetically based alphabet. Parental influence is another reason for the high literacy rate, as many parents begin to read to their children and give them their own books before they are one year of age. Consequently, Japanese children are ready to read by the time they enter first grade. Properly taught in preschool, children can learn between 500 and 1,000 syllable characters before they begin first grade. Japan's cultural expectations are also responsible for high reading achievement: for example, in contrast to male reading attitudes in the United States, the majority of Japanese boys perceive reading to be an appropriate activity. Although there is some evidence that the syllabary may be easier to learn than the Roman alphabet, the most powerful influences on Japan's reading success appear to be the intervention of parents and preschool education. (HTH)

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Early Reading in Japan

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No doubt American teachers find it hard to comprehend the experience of Japanese professionals interested in reading. For quite some time now they have been telling us that reading disabilities are extremely rare and that dyslexics are impossible to find. In examining this cross-cultural anomaly, the Japanese in the past attributed their situation to the nature of the Japanese written language and the different perceptual process involved in learning to read in Japanese (Makita, 1976). More recently, two other hypotheses have been proposed - the interest of parents in teaching their preschoolers to read and the quantity of available publications suitable for preschool children (Sakamoto, 1981). It is the intent of this article to survey all those hypotheses, but most particularly to examine the sociological factors in Japan which result in the need for no remedial reading teachers and one of the world's highest literacy rates.

The Writing System

Of all the world's written languages, Japanese is unique since it employs a dual code: ideographs and a syllabary. Ideographs, called Kanji in Japan, are characters borrowed from written Chinese which are used to represent meaning in Japanese. Kanji, historically the first written system used in Japan, are written symbols which were originally pictographic; they looked like the object they represented. Over time the pictographs evolved into abstract conceptualizations of the object or quality. Because of the differences in spoken Chinese and Japanese, in the 9th century Japan developed a two supplemental systems to augment Kanji characters in representing syntactic structures not present

in Chinese (Taylor, 1978). These supplemental systems, called syllabaries, are written systems where each symbol represents a separate syllable. This is distinctly different from the alphabetic principle where each letter generally represents a different phoneme. If fact, Japanese and Cherokee are the only modern languages with true syllabaries (Barnitz, 1978).

The two Japanese syllabaries together are referred to as Kana even though there are differences between them. Hiragana is the script which is used to represent words which are Japanese in origin. Foreign loan words are written in Katagana. Makita (1968) compares these two syllabaries to upper and lower case letters. To confuse matters even more, a small percentage of written text in Japanese uses both Arabic numbers and Roman letters or Romanji. Romanji is the use of the Roman alphabet to represent Japanese words primarily for the sake of foreigners. Thus, a text written in Japanese typically consists of the following percentages of different scripts: 30% in Kanji, 65% in Hiragana, 4% in Katagana, and 1% in Arabic numbers and Romanji (Taylor, 1976).

At first glance it appears that, if anything, this situation would make learning to read more difficult, yet there are a number of factors which mitigate this. Hiragana and Katagana each have 46 basic symbols. With the addition of various marks, akin to diacritical marks, a total of 71 symbols can be written in either syllabary. These syllables are relatively simple in shape with an average number of three strokes required to write each syllable (Muraishi, 1976). All the Kana syllables are different in appearance and are read consistently the same way.

With only one exception, they always begin with a consonant and end with a vowel (Sakamoto, 1976; Taylor, 1978).

When beginning reading is taught in first grade, the Kana syllabaries are generally introduced before Kanji. By the end of nine years of compulsory schooling in Japan, children are able to read both Kana syllabaries and the 1,850 Kanji characters which are required by the curriculum (Sakamoto, 1976; 1981).

Most Japanese reading researchers maintain that the regularity of the Kana syllabaries are a strong contributing factor to the lack of reading disability cases in Japan. Even coupled with the direct symbol to meaning nature of Kanji, there are those who would argue that for beginning readers learning syllables as the unit of pronunciation is easier and results in less cognitive confusion than learning a phonetically based alphabet (Foss and Hakes, 1978; Downing, 1973b).

It is important to note that while kindergarten is not compulsory in Japan, 70% of Japanese four and five-year old children do attend some type of nursery or preschool. Since 1960 there has been a boom in preschool education in Japan. Part of this is due to the pressure on children to get a "head start" so that they have an advantage when they take competitive examinations at the end of ninth grade for selective senior high schools which can help them later in obtaining a good job. The effect of early training in reading has an effect on writing ability as knowing only Hiragana one is able to write anything in Japanese (Namekawa, 1976).

Parental Influences

Although in the United States since the 1960's parents have been urged to get involved in helping prepare their children for reading instruction, many parents still believe they should keep their "hands off" in case they might do something which would hinder the child (Ollila and Nurss, 1981). Fortunately in Japan this is not the case; and since the 1940's, parents have been strongly encouraged to participate in a variety of ways. These include time for a weekly hour in which everyone in the family reads a book of his or her own choosing, and/or a twenty minute period daily in which the child reads to the mother.

The influence of Japanese mothers on their children's reading interest and ability cannot be denied. Working mothers in Japan are the exception rather than the norm, and their concern about their children's reading is an important variable in early reading ability. Only 20% of parents interviewed in a national study directly taught their preschoolers to read, but far more common were reports of giving children books, letter blocks and answering any questions about reading.

Many parents began to read to their children by the time they are one year of age, and it is usually mother who does this. It is mother who usually buys the child his or her first book, and substantial numbers of children own their own book before age one. In fact, over 90% of two year olds have their own books and are read to regularly at home. When mothers of kindergarteners

were asked why they gave books to their children, the most often stated reasons was to help the child see the joy of reading (Izumoji, 1981).

It is rather startling to hear of a preschool magazine which sells over a million copies a year in Japan. About half of the publications for children are written for preschoolers (Namekawa, 1976). Summarizing these studies Sakamoto (1981) states, "In Japan, the mother's role in children's beginning reading is considered more important than any other factor" (p. 24).

Reading Readiness

The result of this early interest in children's reading is that based on standardized test results, Japanese children are considered ready to read by about 4½ years old. 31% of Japanese children can read all the Hiragana symbols by age three, and 83% can do it by age five. Only a small number of five-year olds, 1%, cannot read any Hiragana five months before they enter first grade. It is also generally found that at the preschool level, girls read better than boys (Sakamoto and Makita, 1973; Sakamoto, 1981). Since 1968 there have been experimental preschools and kindergartens which are teaching three year-olds to read Kanji characters. It is believed that age three is suitable for beginning instruction in Kanji; and that properly taught, children could learn between 500 and 1,000 Kanji characters before beginning school at age six. One thousand Kanji characters is a proximately what is required by the end of elementary school. I. Ishii, a pioneer of this method, stresses proper teaching and repetition. Some criticisms of

this program have focused on whether such an early emphasis on academic matters might not harmfully affect overall child development (Sakamoto, 1981).

Reading Disability and Illiteracy

With the exception of the mentally retarded, approximately 99% of Japanese adults are considered literate (Sakamoto, 1973). While it is not known what specific criteria are used to determine literacy in Japanese, we are told that to be illiterate a person would not be able to read in any one of the three different orthographies required to read Japanese - Kanji, Hiragana and Katagana.

This figure is remarkably similar to the findings of Makita (1968) who conducted a questionnaire study of 247 primary teachers in the Tokyo area. These teachers of 8,195 children reported that only .98% or 89 children had any reading difficulty. No children were reported as having any problem with Kana beyond fourth grade, and only .4% of the children had any problems with Kanji above fourth grade.

Much of research with Japanese people who have a reading disability comes from study of adults who have acquired the disability as a result of brain injury. When reading ability is affected, Sakamoto and Makita (1973) report that Kana rather than Kanji reading ability is likely to suffer. This finding is substantiated by the research of others such as Sasanuma and Fujimura (1971; 1972) and Yamadori (1975). While all of these studies dealt with adult acquired alexia/dyslexia, the evidence seems to suggest that the area for storage of Kana and Kanji is different with different perceptual processes involved and perhaps less susceptability to trauma (Makita, 1976).

Cultural Expectations

Downing, et. al. (1979) conducted a cross-national study which investigated cultural stereotypes and learning to read. Of the countries studies, only Japan and Denmark reported a majority of boys perceiving reading as consistent with the male role. In both the United States and Canada reading was consistently viewed as inappropriate for males. Although there were some problems in the research connected with possible different cross-cultural interpretations of the stimulus materials, these findings appear to be substantiated.

With respect to preschool reading ability in Japan, girls are somewhat better than boys. Also when older disabled Japanese readers are identified on the basis of the difference between intelligence and achievement, more boys than girls have problems. However, these numbers do not appear to be significant. Nevertheless more abled readers are found to spend more time reading daily than disabled readers. The Japanese are also concerned with identifying children whose reading behavior is abnormal which includes categories for children who read excessively, those who do not finish books they start, children reading only one kind of book, or those who want to read books for older children or adults (Sakamoto and Makita, 1973).

The early interest in reading and writing among preschoolers in Japan dwindles over the intervening school years. Chichii (1981) reports that by the second year of junior high school, 38% of the students surveyed had not read a single complete book recently, and a later study indicated students were spending on the average

of 4½ hours a day studying. It is apparently the shift in emphasis from reading for pleasure which develops early reading ability to the perception of reading as a tool for success in later life which is related to the decline in reading for enjoyment.

Conclusion

When viewed cross-culturally, the lack of significant reading problems among Japanese children as well as any significant differences between girls and boys is certianly at odds with the experience in the United States. Although there is some evidence that it may be easier for young children to learn Kana compared to the alphabetic Roman script which we use, the most powerful influence appears to be the intervention of parents and the effect of preschool education in Japan.

From our own experience we know that cultural factors associated with parent education, socioeconomic status and number of books in the home appear to correlate highly with later reading success (Ollila and Nurss, 1981). Certainly the recent studies with respect to Head Start corraborate this. Just in case the word has not gone out yet to American parents: "Hands On! in reading but with care."

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